

**REPORT ON THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE
ON HUMAN RIGHTS INFORMATION, IMPUNITY
AND CHALLENGES OF THE POST-CONFLICT HEALING PROCESS**

**22-26 March 1998, Tunisia
HURIDOCS**

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INTRODUCTION

The HURIDOCS conference and 4th General Assembly were held in Tunisia, March 22-26, 1998. The theme of the conference - human rights information, impunity and challenges of the post-conflict healing process - was chosen to explore and discuss ways in which human rights information workers can assist in the "completion of the human rights agenda". Including, among others, areas such as economic, social and cultural rights (in addition to political and civil rights), women's rights, children's rights and the role of information workers in countries that have constituted truth commissions.

The conference was structured into four broad areas: 1) major conflicts in the world; 2) impunity and the post-conflict healing process, 3) completing the human rights agenda; and 4) challenges for the human rights information worker. Panel discussions, general discussions and group workshops allowed for a variety of discussion/dialogue forums.

1. Major Conflicts in the World

The panel discussion on major conflicts in the world featured speakers who focussed their talks on the "before", "during" and "after" aspects of conflict.

Kumar Rupesinghe of International Alert spoke on early warning systems and crisis prevention, emphasizing the need to develop an information system which provides timely information for action in order to diffuse potential conflict areas. He also explored the problems of information flow in internal conflicts and advocated a multi-tool approach to information dissemination for crisis prevention.

Adama Dieng of the International Commission of Jurists spoke on International Criminal Courts and War Tribunals and called for support of the establishment of an International Criminal Court, presently being discussed by the United Nations.

Jonathan Kuttab of the Mandela Institute in Palestine spoke to the issue from a NGO perspective. He spoke of the need for NGO's to disseminate accurate information and be perceived as non-partisan. Mr. Kuttab described how the NGO's tools for activism are "weapons of light" - information, truth, publicity, solidarity, laws and conscience.

Discussion centred around violations by non-governmental entities and appropriate mechanisms for NGOs, the formation of alternative tools for crisis prevention, the need for partnerships between large NGOs and local actors, and censorship.

2. Impunity and the Post-Conflict Healing Process

The first panel discussed impunity; its theoretical basis (David Fernandez, Centro de Derechos Humanos "Miguel Agustín Pro Juárez") and practical implications in states in transition (Marek Antoni Nowicki, European Commission of Human Rights), followed by Inger Agger discussing the healing process in the context of personal experience in El Salvador and Bosnia. Ms. Agger examined the political factors in defining the meaning and scope of "truth and reconciliation".

Discussion centred around human rights as ideology, the effects of globalization on human rights, monitoring governments in transition and the role of information in facilitating change.

With the groundwork set by the first panel, the second panel looked at what is being done and could be done in the area. Agnes Camacho of the Psychosocial Trauma Program described the work of the program in rehabilitating victims of conflict and torture. Ms. Camacho stressed the need for information workers to be trained in culturally-sensitive processes for information collection, as well as skills to identify trauma. Patricio Orenalla of the University of Chile then described the Chilean experience in providing restitution to victims, with reference to the philosophical base provided by the first panelists. Hans Thoolen, UNHCR and Eric Sottas, Organisation Mondiale Contre le Torture described various ad hoc and permanent mechanisms for improving information work. Mr. Thoolen provided a checklist of necessary conditions for information workers for collaboration in the investigative process.

3. Completing the Human Rights Agenda

Clarence Dias (International Centre for Law in Development) opened the afternoon panel session with the theme "The Unfinished Work". Mr. Dias discussed how globalisation has weakened the state internationally, yet untouched the local, repressive natures of some countries. He also provided an overview of successes to date (eg. the universality of human rights), what roles information workers play in

international human rights monitoring, and the challenges and obstacles that face information workers today. Challenges mentioned included: the resurgence of poverty, patriarchy and racism. Obstacles defined included: the double standards application of human rights; selectivity; non-governmental perpetrators; and the economic imbalance between the north and south.

The afternoon panel dealt with economic, social and cultural rights (Stephen Hansen, AAAS) and the AAAS project to develop a monitoring system for these rights; women's rights (Aurora Javate De Dios, Coalition Against Trafficking in Women) and children's rights (Leylah Khalfallah, Defence for Children International).

The day ended with a general discussion and demonstrations/workshops, including a demonstration on using search engines for human rights information (Lucie Lamoureux, ICHRDD and Patricia Sutherland).

The session continued on March 25th with group workshops on improving human rights work. I attended the session on "Issues for human rights libraries". The group spent some time sharing tools and techniques used for managing information and information dissemination (eg. indexing of newspaper clippings, current awareness etc.). Major concerns were also raised about: 1) receiving adequate support (both financially and with staffing); 2) training needs; 3) the need to develop advocacy techniques to lobby both within the organization, and to outside agencies, on the importance of information work; and 4) the need to coordinate resource sharing and networking within regions.

Working group reports were then presenting to the plenary.

(I left the conference at this stage to return home)

The afternoon panel session covered issues in information access (Debra Guzman, HURINET), technological possibilities in the future (Patty Whaley, Amnesty International) and the potential for information campaigns and other activities (Jagdish Parikh, Human Rights Watch).

PERSONAL PARTICIPATION

I participated in the regional meeting for North America as a member of the Steering Committee of the Canada-US Human Rights Information and Documentation Network (CUSHRID Net).

Lucie Lamoureux of the International Centre for Human Rights and Democratic Development and myself conducted a demonstration on Using Search Engines for Human Rights Information.

FOLLOW-UP

I have been asked, informally, to speak to the British Columbia Library Association's Third World Libraries Interest Group, as well as address a class at the University of British Columbia's School of Library and Information Studies.

Articles have been arranged for the BCLA newsletter *The Reporter* as well as the newsletter of the Special Libraries Association - Western Canada region.